

# Punks

## BLAKE BABY

He may be young, but big things are expected of Peter Blake. Already.

by Grant Glickson

**PETER BLAKE, AN 18-YEAR-OLD LEFT-HANDED FIREBALLER, PROVED EARLY ON IN HIS illustrious high-school career that he had the stuff of a major-league pitcher.**

In only his second varsity start for the Indianola (Iowa) Indians, the then-14-year-old Blake found himself on the mound in front of hundreds of spectators in a classic intra-state showdown with arch-rival Lincoln High of Des Moines.

Through six innings, Blake had pitched masterfully, allowing only three hits, four walks and one earned run while striking out 11. But in the seventh and final frame, the lanky freshman loaded the bases before running a full count on Mike Potts, one of the state's best hitters.

"My catcher gave me the fastball sign and I shook it off," he recalls. "He hesitated a few seconds before he gave me the curveball. He was cool with it. He knew that I was throwing it for strikes."

With the runners in motion and the opposition's home crowd on its feet, Blake threw the hook, a pitch that, midway in its flight, dips down towards the batter's shoulder and drops into the catcher's mitt at knee-level. All the hitter could do was stare at it helplessly. Strike three, ballgame.

"It was such a big clutch performance," says his coach, Jim Blythe. "The game was riding on the pitch, and he knew that was the pitch to get the kid out. He threw it and buckled this kid up and trotted off the mound like he did it every day."

His father Joe, who got as far as Triple-A in the Yankees organization before an elbow injury ended his eight-year career, knew that the breaking ball was the right

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call in that situation. "I probably would have been six or seven years older than he was before I figured out, first of all, what is it that [the batter] can't hit, and second, can I get it over the plate with the bases loaded," he says. "At his age, I probably would have bounced it 10 feet in front of the plate."

For the last decade, the state of Iowa has been a field of dreams for the Blakes. Peter's 27-year-old brother, Joe Jr., was a Division III All-American outfielder; Ben, 26, was a minor league pitcher for the Cleveland Indians, and Casey, 24, is a top prospect in the Toronto Blue Jays organization.

"Playing baseball is just something we did," says Joe Sr.

Peter's arsenal—fastball, curveball and changeup—are of the same ilk as that of Jimmy Key of the Baltimore Orioles.

"He could go out and pitch professionally right now," says an anonymous midwest scout. "He has an average major league fastball that has movement late in the strike zone. His curveball is what they call in the game 'the hammer'. It's unhittable. He throws it at 82 miles an hour, it's a late breaker and he throws it at any point of the count. And when his straight changeup is on, it too is devastating."

The 6-2, 205-pound Blake has dominated hitters since he first toed the pitching rubber. In his career, he is 20-4, with four saves and an eye-popping 0.87 ERA. He has averaged close to two strikeouts (1.67) an inning while allowing only 0.38 walks per. He has three career no-hitters. Blake can also handle a bat, evident last year when he hit .405 with 20 home runs and 60 RBI.

"My individual statistics aren't really highlights, because I kind of expect that for myself," he says. "I'm just shooting towards getting to the major leagues."

Blake's greatest hurdle on the road to The Show will be rebounding from minor shoulder surgery on a partially torn rotator cuff this past September.

"The doctor said that if I work hard, I should be back better than ever," Peter says.

Although arm surgery often scares off scouts, Blake is that rare prospect that still has them coming out in droves in preparation for the June '97 amateur draft.

"Peter Blake is one of those kids who is going to be extremely highly pursued next year," says Jeff Cornell, of the Major League Scouting Bureau. "If he's healthy, he's going to be a very sought-after player."